12.11.24 Meeting USAGM

* SF - What’s new for USAGM – about a year ago Meta came out with Whatsapp Channels – Everyone has it. More like Telegram. When you top off your cell phone the whatasapp channel sits on your phone and doesn’t cost you any money. It costs no extra money – zero cost to the consumer and is encrypted. Lengthy stream of content whether pictures, video, audio or text can be consumed from any. Making a big push to use these channels in the Africa division. Why wouldn’t you watch a video or listen to the radio for free if you could. Technically aren’t supposed to do livestreaming but are hacks for it. Starlink also changing media landscape. Could make an argument that we are in a post social media place now. Want to hitch efforts to Whatsapp Chanels – day to day news, bread and butter. But our adversaries can do that too. TRT has a big presence on Whatsapp channels as do other adversary media. Media unit can be text, videos, audio clips, photos. Can do a lot of 30 minute broadcasts. Native to the app. Never have to leave Whatsapp channels to get a great media experience.
* K - Most of the nonsense in Africa happens on Whatsapp channels.
* K - Baseline what VOA is doing – 18/19 languages. French, Hausa, English, Bambara, Fulde. Senegal is difficult. Tough media market. Because French has a huge media market, and domestic. They are already acculturated to a particular media source. The anti-french sentiment has been really bad for the French broadcasters in many of the media markets there. Some of them have been kicked out of most of the coup countries and some others. But VOA is still on in almost all of these countries. BF they were kicked out of periodically but are back on now. Have FM stations in most of the countries as well as affiliate partners. 46% weekly reach in Niger post-coup. VOA does local/vernacular languages really well.
* S - Market specific content in local languages. Reports in the target region.
* S - Diaspora audiences around the elections – did a lot of diaspora programing without US – folks have become citizens, how they feel about it, voting, etc.
* Also did a really fun series on if you would tell the US president what you would tell them or what would you want them to do. WE want the US to have a bigger econ connection to our country. We want them to stop the war in Palestine. We want the US to provide educational opportunities.
* Other markets – in the Africa division everyone has a real visceral sense of what the audiences in each location respond to.
* Ghana – just covered the election there that worked out really well. CDI and BF have a big presence and good reach.
* Benin – have stuff but isnt’ as strong. Senegal, they don’t have the penetration they would like.
* Issues with mis/dis info and Russia. Oh yes, seeing it. Definitely seeing it. Wouldn’t say that we are tactically addressing those issues right now.
* Powers of information centers where the western media isn’t supplanted but the local is supplemented/alternatives that the adversaries are offering that gives their strategic take on things. Obviously the ultimate goal here is to be able to shift through the soft power narrative shift the convo away from western interests to the interests of these other countries, Iran, Turkey, Russia, China. People have talked about the new colonialism – you can’t get away from these. Because there are too many resources that powers want and want to take advantage of.
* People pushing on narratives that are already present in a lot of cases. French security forces were already there – narratives were already there – but Russia really good at manipulating.
* China really – smaller and medium size ones go through a lot of financial issues. Ups and downs. If you can get sound boards, training, finances and lay on top of that content – great way to control whatever that media house is producing. And some of the
* China is so invested in a lot of the infrastructure in delivering media there. Starshare. They aren’t controlling all of the content going through those, but they could. And sometimes our content is blocked our banned. Always trying to research the impact of our adversaries in these markets. Comparing us head to head to RT or CGCN, we have much bigger audiences, but there is so much seeded in the local media – like Chinese content – that is not branded from them, but is there. It isn’t super measurable and it isn’t as well known but it is there.
* Yes – self-censorship of local media too depending on where they are getting their funding. They aren’t going to publish something anti-China or Russia
* Afrikmedia – huge – they don’t brand themselves as Russia – pan African out of Cameroon in French – but Russian.
* 18 focus groups in 3 African countries on if audiences can distinguish the source of this material and can they tell the narratives and where it is coming from. RT, French, VOA, etc. Have them see what they think the angle is and what they find most trustworthy. Guinea,, Mali, Senegal – focused on Russian influence. Done in 6 monhts.
* S – if the US wanted to play the same game on the same level as China we could certainly do it. It isnt’ that the countries want to run with Russia or China but they are making economic decisions based on what is best for them in the short time. But it is big money. Big money and long term thinking.
* Yes - BBC – as funding goes down – has pulled out of a lot of traditional radio etc – and Russia, Turkey has moved into a lot of this space. Less funding affects the ability to get content into these markets.
* S - We had to close our Hausa bureau in Abuja. And all of the folks that worked for us went to TRT (budget closure).
* S – if there is an economic upside for the target media, the US could be just as competitive with anyone. We have the added bonus that our journalism is founded in tradition of balance – which is something we can’t say that our adversaries practice. So we need to be able to trust that our audience will recognize that difference at some point. Can be competitive if we have the intent to.
* How else could you be competitive? What more could you be doing? What is on the cutting room floor? S – **number one thing is to bring journalists to the US and train them how to be a journalist.**
* K – **business team does training development for our partner stations that carry VOA content but sometimes it is funded by other parts of the USG to fund specific things.** DOS – wildlife trafficking. **Part of the world where more is more in terms of resources. A lot of the media markets are pretty underdeveloped. Vernacular language question – linguist diversity greater than anywhere else. Even just small amounts of $ into building a vernacular language presence goes a long way.** There is a lot of appetite for really broad content from VOA. In Africa it is everything, tech, sports, ag, psychology – everything. It isn’t seen as hostile or threatening in Africa – people see it as a mark of respect for their culture in Africa. **Want to push it, but resources thin, spread thin, budget cuts, and don’t want to overstretch them. Want to launch it with enough resources to do it right, but not a lot of money. Like $1-2 million. Range of content to get to a lot of different people. More money would also allow to cover a broader range of stories that the market is interested in having.**
* S - Fulani (Fulde language)– nomadic Islamic folks, huge number of folks speak it. Big deal and they just launched it.
* In DRS – Ligala – is originally from the SE of the DRC and is the defacto national language now – now broadcasting in that and really successful.
* K - Recent research from Mali and the audience stayed relatively steady between when the coup happened but the composition changed significantly. Went from French to Bambala.
* S – work very closely with the YALI partner. Wouldn’t call it a strategic partnership but it is a defacto. Program got off on the right foot, in positions of power and influence. YALI folks come visit but they don’t have the $ to bring them themselves.
* **K - Libya – have a lot of people who pass through there. Arabic handled by our middle east team. Can see what the audience looks like there. Not a VOA thing. Corporate is Middle East Broadcasting Company, Radio Sawa, Magram voices. Program reaching into Libya but not Libya specific. It is pan-Arab. Will get a contact there. Slightly different issue there.**
* K – business development team does have an office in Accra attached to the embassy that covers placement of training for all of W Africa. There isn’t an American based there but there is local staff.
* S – bureau is in Narobi. All the others are closed now. And Jo-berg. Physical presence. Do they do the direct management of the news and dissemination in W Africa. Just did that with Ghana our lead reporter was covering the election. And have local reporters/freelancers that work all over the country.
* Health issues? Malaria and other health false narratives? Do you do content to address them? **Healthy Living show** - just heard from the director on this issue – one could think about this show as an anti-disinfo vehichle. It is all about the real info on diseases, best practices for avoiding them, anti-malaria, making water potable, certain drugs that you could take that could help a certain situation. It is 99% there are some cultural there that are addressed too. Can send us a link to that show. It is about putting out the correct narrative. It is broadcast in French, English, Portugese, Husai, Swahili – maybe 6 langauges. The way it is constructed is compartmentalized and will take the general thrust of a particular episode and target it to the region.
* K – another big narrative is about security narratives. FM suspended in BF and deciding whether to pay the fine to get it back on. And banned local partnership with local media. Just the westerners. Not Russians we think, but we aren’t sure. It would have technically applied to them as well. Carried content on a bunch of terrorist attacks in the region and bad coups and used it as justification – narratives as French failures and Russians are coming in to fix the terrorists. Radio had been suspended there. Still have short wave radio. And have Whatsapp news and links.
* Yes – Russians are really playing up the anti-western neo colonialism, American neo-colonialism around the world. Connecting what is happening in Ukraine around the world. Trying to take over the resources to give it back to you to make sure you prosper narrative.
* K - Startup Africa – about startups about indigenous target regions – creative and industrious young men and women creating companies from scratch. And as they build them out then get big partnerships with google, etc. All sorts of permutations fro education to entertainment to helping to improve the yields on farms. This season on 4th season is all about AI. Facilitating that as a business prop, whether it being security or combating misinformation, at least 30 companies featuring it this year. AI is the basis for a bunch of interesting startups. And so we are featuring these tech companies that are founded by folks from our target region. Africa run, African staffed – cutting the same kind of business deals they have any other place in the world. They are looking for Global customer bases, not just local. Mention it because in the battle of ides this is a great example of what this country is really good at. Using our expertise in the IT world and VOA to tell this tech story that no one else was really talking about. And the coproduction element is really important. The idea from the inception of the show was the create a really meaningful and high production that wasn’t just produced by VOA and US and given. This model used local reporters, local and national stations to go out and just track down these stories. They get together with them to see who is doing AI in Accra, in Dakar – the laborious part is figuring out where the stories are but the benefit is really getting some gems and able to tell stories that no one else is telling. In season 2 these two young guys in Kigali were telling story where kid was telling his mom he wanted to study IT, I want to study inductive electricity and his mother was like what are you talking about white people do that. At this provides a model where people can see, oh I could be that guy or woman
* S – point of sustainability – history of country investing in training good journalists but if no one can make any good money doing it – if no one can make any money doing this how will it be supported. And ad companies hollowing it out.
* Yes - Can make money on WhatsApp? Meta doesn’t have a monetization model on WhatsApp yet. But there are creative ways you can do it – informal companies charging people to share stuff in their group. A third party would pay them to post things. But not within the platform yet.
* French Min of Def has a research unit that does a lot of research on the disinformation.

From Yelena in email:

* Report outlining the major findings from the Russian emigre project we had discussed earlier.
* Details about VOA Africa Division and MBN operations, from the just published [2024 Annual ACPD Report](https://secure-web.cisco.com/1gj72Q_bbXkOP4LBEDpwKEY8SVA6TBJORKcn28UTLuziRMvbIxfXmMrod5PzI3BAdfzr57WryEwWrzFOCZFSZb1BvUqiPWH196DR7E-CpUlhaPevU_ZfniCRTfAH3_EoETbq_E1D_jDruwkkDMp8XkPaMKrnp-9va0k4nz19NaxBkF-9jRTldTmS_LiuD401ok0ulWLE3_dg1ls7tHSWQbHEsT6FCmcdZF-d31ugdrh25Sq2HPq9b83bUQNtIw3wSZZEP1LuSrBZkRCOQ0wVXZLT0wQHfeZWWxIemELhC9O77PSKqyb5cjhhCePK0743CNfCbRgHQ058cTpLMpEELMCyb-c7XumfgL-zcLwsojOQlVUBOW7cwV7ugygfgRwpcr6OQBcaNl3j9cMbt9K7Z-NEZvP_G3-49nvbZihE0OzA/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.state.gov%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2024%2F12%2F2024_ACPD-AnnualReport-508C_FINAL_updated.pdf) — attached.
* VOA [language service fact sheets](https://secure-web.cisco.com/1ZbN6iKr1_041LA1PCymHUCWWFGapwue9mvalrD9ariQJzGO_MBnX-CZf9PQK11gamhq2myia5Ta2KFh7fmNPvxm4vBKPUdsCXXX5YWgVvNjg-trS_isu2tbsj-npL_9IMmX75f7_cI6ovsu4iB7ZStpjw5px3pN4fkWNdjdwt7USyk3snrGpLOYUvNHJihUTwxEa0w6bQ83_otdGDfb26KEPeQUFsfzfzoroG5iCeP45-pLp2RLwHfbwf-46DrFZQSYdUNn0YYkVfgJdldu9XAt43cLfxvv0xipt6iuuNisWOqkOFPyLwYrFLGooPfMhY5JG_MTqbqHZu0-HpCA_x2l72E5Ckq5BRF7u3OdGcsLiun3dMx_k2ISCujBJRaJQlnureXKWedygMHs9W3C9zG_Bo_ljHBJhfgU30c1DWJM/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.insidevoa.com%2Fa%2Fvoa-fact-sheets%2F3780820.html).
* List of [all media training offered by our Office of Business Development](https://secure-web.cisco.com/1O1yMiwx7WAaqpgR7C3JoSGRwJ4xOeHLVie8PabJJbfp3vC3YLZ_f8C8qzfR1qUVaPjnPmh895XZoJ1lVtQa__ENMahDbgbQaTMnHU2CwalF6SLdO5FXZK7zwzjzSdASfldzMI5e6J552p4XaC7ip3U6YWFBDiIIRsjoVk6cr4Iugj9p-4Og7_bRBAVOjiCFwXxH60Sm6Wy2c47imSmx9Gk15nlrcq11jPYZ-oq9-mD40RiCEJmdAKM5McznKdsV4vMPxXQJRM6jZTOTdPEJNt-MjZLsyjoOXe1JSKWibJQkjq4lKEzzPb9BKZ6arHUdBlS-jNZ00Ik3wdmPxVhLXFO5AZd_biN7WxbdgqqW0OR_zxkv4Bkw432mWjs9M4YY33qEeb9WxPBU4hCOGpJojiOCbvBPNh1h6V8A78yFbdk8/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.usagm.gov%2Four-work%2Fmedia-development%2F). If you zoom in on the map, you can see the details for each one.
* A little more info on our latest language addition — the [Fulani Service](https://secure-web.cisco.com/155-OD7GqVG7y8c84JEq8bO7yQiRHm8ve03YcdLGcsXNRM44YlU99c7N1iynVu0j1pGLduqQAf1irxvw_SDS7T-p_dgWje83dPngoyvKS_qGg4QpvSXI0_Q6w6afEzJ4Pyw1RfubXpiFZwGriMjH4mKhQ_OC0NMM8RkK23Poo36M_uUxBXndLoCUbKsi7Ro9fjZfD18gxobni6v42Ka1LUL9jM6BkJGUUzpTVjjZjF20aAz7M6S8FmkOHaglqbK3Z-EwmUvOTRzSrCDsQdeSy9rJTION3lGGMKqDwe1CtPZj2yf6hn9lmnPG072hWEWU3QnnVkLIL9qYNHBVfmPE4o6HxSAxlHG1dGBtLx3y4TpBJjFahnTsV9OJI0XfmIiFHFtDwQjxwUmeoYAEi0_VV73yL-ByzOI_RISMknbdpEe8/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.insidevoa.com%2Fa%2F7751747.html).
* USAGM network reach by language and format in select countries + number of local media affiliates per country — attached. Reach refers to the percentage of respondents who said that they have used USAGM content in the past week in a nationally representative survey.
* GEC recently did a report on media in Africa — it's not classified, but it is FOUO and we're not authorized to share it. If you have contacts there, I would suggest taking a look at it as well.
* A little more information about countering disinfo initiatives by VOA's Africa Division:

This week the Africa Division launches a new dis-, mis-information TV/social media series called "Information Warriors: Africa's Fight Against Dis-and Misinformation." The series highlights efforts by African fact-checking organizations in the DRC, Malawi, Cameroon, Ghana, and Mozambique to combat false information using journalism best practices and the latest verification technology. The series will be used on our TV shows, websites, and social media platforms over the next four to six weeks.

The Africa Division is developing a countering disinformation video product, tentatively titled "Truth Africa." The fact-checking and anti-disinformation TV segment tackles misinformation in Africa by debunking false claims and providing verified information. We are seeking to partner with popular regional fact-checking outlets, journalists, and influencers who can amplify the message in relatable ways, ensuring a broader reach. Examples of African fact-checking organizations include Africa Check, Dubawa (operating in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia), PesaCheck (East Africa), and FactCheck Zambia. The segment is in pre-production and will launch in early 2025.

The division recently launched "VOA News Engage," a pilot project through the US embassy in Botswana. It involves providing the text of news stories published on our websites via USAGM Direct to local daily newspapers in Botswana for publishing under the "Voice of America" byline. The immediate goal is to counter a similar effort by the Chinese government to influence local newspapers. If the pilot is successful, we will consider expanding it to other areas in sub-Saharan Africa.